

IT'S IN THE BAG

by Bill Davis

-Um, hi!

-'Lo.

-Nice day, huh?

-I wouldn't know.

-No, I guess not. What with

the paper bag and all.

-Oh. You noticed.

-Well, it is rather hard to miss.

-My coach made me do it. He says my acting has all the range of a sack. So I thought I'd wear this to prove him wrong.

-And?

-He hasn't noticed. But I did get a two last round.

-I'm sure that's progress. Listen, it isn't possible to correct anyone's' acting disabilities in a single column. But here are some suggestions I ripped off from some excellent coaches, and two thought provoking books (see below). You might try out these ideas, and see if the paper sack isn't necessary any more.

I. **Grab some James-- Lange theory** -- this concept argues that our inner reactions often build as we take on outer expressions. This is the idea behind "wear a happy face, and soon you

will be ect." In short, act like it, and it soon will be, true. This may be an approach that can break an interper rut wide open.

For example, you have a hysterical section in your D.I. (um, who DOESN'T have a hysterical...never mind). This section seems never to sell itself, to the judges or anyone else. This is probably because it has never been sold to the most important audience -- you.

Get some privacy, and a mirror. Picture hysteria. Try it in the mirror. It will be awful. Try it until you can approach some clinical detachment in doing the exercise. If it helps, dim the lights so only your major features are visible. Otherwise that flaming zit will keep bringing you back to adolescent reality (unless it makes you hysterical then hey, whatever works...).

Keep working at it, until you can feel what it takes to appear hysterical. Then, like muscle memory in sports, duplicate the expression until you can reproduce it, even when not hysterical.

Now for most of us, this won't be enough to fool anyone in a round. But if it's good enough to fool YOU, then genuine emotions can follow.

II. **Learn the tools of the trade** -- All actors (or interpers, if you insist) have three tools for expression: the face, the body, and the voice. All three of these tools work at various levels of intensity, much like an amplified speaker. Great emotion and impact can be generated at low volumes, but at the very top, overamplification can cause some wretched sound - and acting. Do some experimenting with small, very small, small, tiny levels, and see what happens. Try this line at MAXIMUM intensity, Normal levels,

and teeny tiny intensity.

"It doesn't matter. By this time tomorrow, we'll be dead, anyway."

(Why this particular line?

A couple of years ago, an interper set up four feet away from me, and screamed it in my face. It was a memorable experience.) I think you will find the minimum treatment by far the most effective, even though most high school actors wouldn't play it that way.

III. **Shake your body!**

-- some basic principles of use of the body, particularly the hands and the arms.

A. In general, positive emotions expand, and negative emotions contract. Get happy -- get bigger. Grief -- let's watch you slowly shrink. Playing the scene from *The Elephant Man*, as Merrick suffers rejection, the actor should start big and then get smaller, smaller, until by the end of the scene we feel as tiny as Merrick, and just as deformed. I've seen some amazing work with this principle, even though sometimes the interper didn't even recognize what she was doing.

B. Most gestures should curve, not chop, unless the idea is to suggest nervousness or strong negative emotion. As a corollary, most gestures should not cross the body, unless you intend something to really glare in the judge's eyes. For example, in *Little Big Man*, after the massacre at the Battle of the Washita, Jack Crabb might reach across his body to pick up some bloody water from the river, and fling it across his body away from him, suggesting the sign language for death. But as with all dramatic gestures, a very little is sometimes too much!

C. Every character of substance has a "master gesture" that immediately iden-

tifies that character -- the nervous brush back of the hair, the flip-flop of a palm, the finger on the side of the nose (if you're playing Santa Claus). Generally, as with many theatre conventions, this follows a rule of three; the gesture increases in effectiveness to the third repetition, and decreases rapidly thereafter. So, look for a critical time for the third repetition -- either as a way of identifying the character in a possibly confusing passage, or highly amplified at a peak moment.

D. **Business** -- characters need to be doing something. Many times the piece suggests appropriate "stuff, and sometimes it doesn't. Therefore, there are two types of business; "definite" which is necessary action such as answering doors and phones, and "indefinite", like the ubiquitous cigarette. Business makes a character much more real, and increases the perceived difficulty of the piece.

IV. **In your face!** -- I had a director in college who used to scream to us "Work your face!" This used to give us plenty of ammunition for imitating him behind his back. And it's true that unmotivated facial movement makes one look viciously depraved.

However, after years of chewing on half-baked and sometimes totally raw interpers, I can testify that

the average high school actor underplays the face, particularly the lower jaw. Not only does this make the actress appear as if her chops are wired shut, it also reduces the quality of her diction.

Two other basic principles react before you act, and show the reaction of characters who are listening to critical lines. Example -- phone rings. Character who is going to answer the phone looks at the phone, then reaches for it. "Hello? Aunt Margaret! I thought you had fallen overboard into the school of sharks!" Cut over to Margaret's husband, even though he doesn't have the next line. Instead, his line is now business.

V. **Watch that tone of voice!** -- Tones of voice come in four basic categories -- domestic, social, business and solemn. An example of each; domestic tone "I don't think I love you anymore;" social - "So I told him that I wanted a divorce"; business - "that divorce will be two thousand dollars, ma'am"; and solemn - "and that's why divorce lawyers drive Lamborghinis". Tones should change all the way through interps -- it's the sure sign of a shallow interp when they don't! Listen to the conversation of your peers -- hear the changes in tone? Note that some of the most shocking scenes in movies gain impact by the character delivering a criti-

cal line in the "wrong" tone. Of course, this only works if all the other lines are delivered in the right tone. (For all you Monty Python lovers; perhaps this is why their humor runs dry within a ten minute H.I.)

Most importantly, reconsider your script for its melody. Every script has a tune -- it is the job of the interper to find the conjunction between his/her voice and the that tune. Consider the melody of *Greater Tuna* versus Woody Allen's *The Whore of Mensa*. Both are very funny, and very wretched if delivered in the wrong tune. Best example of off key tuning: *Good Morning, Vietnam!* I've seen a dozen actors try it as Robin Williams. 'Taint no one can sing comedy like Robin Williams! Find your own voice!

Still don't know what I'm talking about? Go rent *A Few Good Men*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Verdict*, and other great courtroom dramas. Listen to the singing of the summations to the jury.

Well, this isn't enough, perhaps, to get you to nationals. But at least maybe you can act your way out of a paper bag. Oh, sorry.

Sources; Franklin, Miriam, *Rehearsal; The Principles and Practice of Acting for the Stage* (Prentice-Hall: New Jersey) 1972

Cohen, Robert *Acting One* (Mayfield: California) 1984

[*The Rostrum is proud to welcome Bill Davis as a regular columnist. Bill's reputation as an excellent coach in Kansas and a clever writer in previously published Rostrum articles is well known.*]